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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOVIET NAVY

L'Echo d'Alger
Algiers, 7 Oct 1953

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Ministerial Autonomy of the Soviet Navy

Although Soviet naval construction suffered a severe setback during World War II, the USSR now reportedly has a total tonnage of permanently armed combat ships equal to that of Great Britain. This development has resulted from (a) the rapid reconstruction of shipyards, (b) the assistance of many German technicians from the GDR, and (c) an intense rearmament program characterized by the recent setting up of an independent Ministry of the Navy (until February 1950, the Soviet Navy was under a Ministry of Armed Forces). Apparently, the Soviet Navy has been given a greater role in accordance with the "oceanic" strategy emphasized again and again by the Soviet leaders. The naval air force is still part of the Navy, while the three large air commands (strategic bombing, pursuit, and tactical force) have remained under the Ministry of War.

Reliance on Mines and Submarines

The Soviet Navy, however, will still have to rely mainly on its submarines and particularly on the use of mines, much as did the German Navy [during World War II]. A great variety of mines have been developed, the magnetic and acoustic types being the most widely used. The mines can be laid by submarines, planes, or surface vessels.

The Navy is estimated to have a minimum of 350 submarines (about 100 of these are reportedly obsolete) and from 50 to 100 more under construction. Of the 250 submarine units which have military value, at least 100 are said to be of the ocean-going class (about 1,500 tons) and 70 to 80 of the medium class (about 700 tons); the remainder consists of small "coastal" submarines (about 200 tons). There are in addition about 20 German submarines, which were part of the Soviet war booty and are much used as models by the Soviet submarine builders.

In accordance with the oceanic strategy, the Soviet submarines more recently put into service have been almost entirely of the ocean-going class. They are divided into two types, the "K" and "L" submarines, weighing 1,400 and 1,560 tons respectively. They are said to be a remarkable compromise between the submersible and the true submarine, and are said to have an operating range of over 7,000 miles (probably through use of the snorkel). Furthermore, the "L" ship reportedly does 22 knots when surfaced and 18 knots when submerged.

Surface Ships (Cruisers and Destroyers)

It appears that the construction of cruisers in particular has been accelerated in the past few years. Five cruisers of the Chapayev class are known to have been launched in 1950 and 1951. They weigh 10,000 tons, and armed with twelve 152-millimeter guns, eight 100-millimeter guns, and twenty-four 37-millimeter antiaircraft guns. The Sverdlovclass was produced next; two are in service, and at least six more reportedly are under construction. They weigh 13,000 tons and are equipped with twelve 152-millimeter guns (not designed for use against aircraft), a twelve 100-millimeter antiaircraft guns, twenty-eight 37-millimeter antiaircraft guns, and ten 533-millimeter torpedo tubes. Finally, the Soviets have the obsolete Kirov cruisers weighing 8,500 tons, as well as two former German cruisers. The latter are very likely stripped of armament, if not actually condemned.

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As for the Soviet destroyers, their number is no doubt high, yet difficult to determine. There are several types now in use, ranging from 1,500 to 2,500 tons in weight. An additional 16 units are said to be under construction; each unit weighs 2,000 tons, and is armed with four 130-millimeter guns and eight 533-millimeter torpedo tubes. Speed is said to be an essential characteristic of the Soviet destroyers, and many of them reportedly have been equipped to operate as mine layers.

Naval Air Arm

The essence of the Soviet Navy's offensive potential lies in its submarines and naval air arm. The latter, according to an apparently serious estimate, may now have a total strength of from 2,000 to 3,000 planes, based in the four maritime regions, as follows: the White and Barents Seas (Arctic region), the Far East, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea. Approximately half of these are pursuit planes, while the rest are bombers, torpedo planes, and reconnaissance planes. Some of the pursuit planes are reportedly also used to drop bombs and torpedoes, a possibility strengthened by a Scandinavian press item stating that the TU-12 (designed by Tupolev) is equipped to launch two 900-kilogram torpedoes.

Reverse Side of the Picture

Imposing as Soviet naval power may seem, the fact remains that its forces are distributed among the four principal naval regions and thus are at a great distance from one another, without much possibility of intercommunication. It is true that the completion recently of the Volga-Don Canal added the last branch of the waterways connecting the five seas, and that the smaller naval vessels are constructed of detachable parts that can be transported by rail. Nevertheless, the Soviet Navy is still obliged to maintain a fleet in each of the seas. Also, the Baltic and Black Sea regions have their particular requirements, inasmuch as the Soviets intend to maintain unopposed naval superiority there.

The regions where the Soviets might conceivably have the most success with their oceanic strategy are the Arctic and Far East, the only regions with access to the open sea. No doubt, much has already been accomplished in these regions, which have important naval bases (each base has a three-way command: sea, air, and coastal), shipyards, repair shops, outlying stations closer to the North Pole, and improved communications with the hinterland of the USSR. Nevertheless, the two regions have a rigorous climate, and the only section of their extensive coastlines that is ice-free throughout the year is a narrow zone on the Barents Sea, including Murmansk and the former Finnish port of Petsamo.

These factors, coupled with the distance from the large sea routes to be used by an eventual enemy, are on the whole disadvantageous to the proposed oceanic strategy.

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